



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

# Security Review

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After the occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the epicenter of hostilities shifted to eastern Ukraine, specifically to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The Russian-speaking population was not loyal to Kyiv even before that but the events in Crimea and the Russian assistance invigorated the local separatists who, along with adventurers backed by the regular Russian troops, managed to gain control over parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The fighting turned out to be quite bloody and long lasting. There were large casualties on both sides, including civilians. Coupled with a high-profile incident of the downing of a passenger plane, it caused a wide international reverberation and world interest in resolving the conflict.

The efforts of the leading OSCE countries had led to a certain agreement and the cessation of intense hostilities by September 2014. A quadripartite agreement (Germany, France, Russia, Ukraine) was achieved on the separation of the parties and a ceasefire. The line of contact was divided into sectors and precincts where a group of OSCE military observers began to monitor the “silence” regime. Since then, the intensity and scale of the hostilities have been significantly reduced. However, every now and then the situation would worsen which was followed by a new agreement on a ceasefire and the establishment of a “silence” regime.

It should be noted that since March 2021, the number of incidents has increased dramatically. At the same time, regular Russian troops began to gather along Ukraine's eastern borders and Crimea.

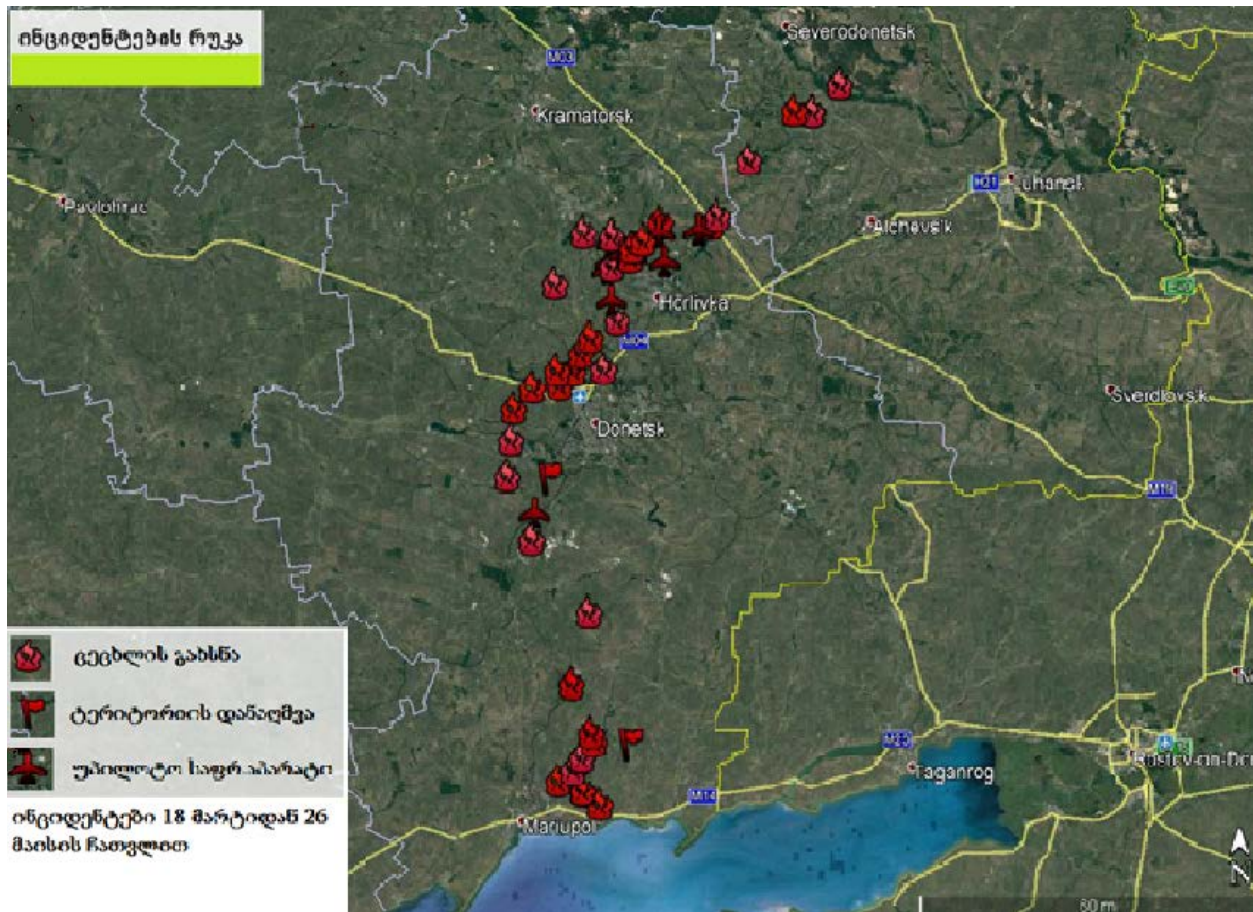
### **Situation in Spring of 2021**

On March 3, the unrecognized territories of Donbas announced their withdrawal from another ceasefire agreement reached in the summer of 2020 and declared that they would open fire on the positions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. They fired from a variety of weapons along almost the entire dividing line including 152 and 122mm howitzers, 120mm and 82mm mortars, anti-tank missile systems, 100mm anti-tank cannons, various types of grenade launchers, machine guns of various calibers and assault and sniper rifles. Remote mining was carried out and unmanned aerial vehicles were engaged in combat and reconnaissance flights (see Figure 1).

The aggregate data on casualties and injuries during these incidents have not been released by either party. However, according to the President of Ukraine, 30 Ukrainian servicemen were killed mainly by sniper fire from the beginning of the year to the end of April.

According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, 28 battalion tactical groups from the western and central military districts as well as airborne forces were stationed at the Russian-Ukrainian

border in Donbas and Crimea by March 30. From the Russian side they were located in the Bryansk, Voronezh and Rostov regions, more precisely at the military training grounds in Pogonovo (Voronezh region), Klinttsy (Bryansk region), Opuk and Angarsk (both Crimea). Twelve additional battalion tactical groups were stationed in the Rostov region whose readiness period is one to two days.



**Figure 1. Incidents in the Areas Adjacent to the Dividing Line**

As early as the beginning of April, the concentration of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border had reached its maximum since 2015, mainly in Crimea and the Voronezh region. Airborne motorized artillery units and armored vehicles were deployed. Among them were units that participated in the 2014 war; namely, the 76th Airborne Division (Pskov) and the 74th Motorized Brigade (Kemerovo). Almost the entire 7th airborne-assault division was deployed to Crimea.

Between the period of March 15 and April 15, a field camp was set up at the Opuk military range and the Kerch Peninsula in Crimea. Most probably, units of the 58th Army (136th Motor

Rifle Brigade, 291st Artillery Brigade) were stationed there. Additional equipment of this army (tanks, other artillery systems) was also deployed to Crimea.

Russia has deployed the 342nd Radio Technical Regiment of the Eastern Military District to Crimea. This is the first such case of deployment from the Far East to Crimea.

According to Ukrainian intelligence, the number of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border had increased to 110,000 as of April 15. At the beginning of March, this number was 89,000. Forty-seven tactical battalion groups were deployed along the border and in Crimea. The Russian "peacekeeping" contingent stationed in Moldova should also be taken into account (Russian forces concentrated at the Ukrainian border and in Crimea are shown in Figure 2).

The Russian unit was supported by about 350 planes and 250 helicopters. It was possible to involve long-range aviation in the operations. More than 40 ships and two submarines provided naval support.

Field and air control points were set up. The combat and logistics systems were strengthened. Certain radio-electronic combat brigades from the Western and Southern Military Districts were deployed to combat positions.

Landing and artillery crafts of the Caspian fleet were deployed to the Black Sea for control inspections during the winter period, presumably 15 units. Following the orders from the Commander of the Southern Military District, marine and coast guard units of the Black and Caspian Sea fleets were engaged in the exercises.

The command of the Russian armed forces took care of the combat readiness of the units stationed in the occupied territories. Up to 28,000 military personnel are stationed there. The commanders are Russian army officers. There is also a large group of 2,000 Russian military advisers and instructors in the Donbas.

Military personnel of the RF cadre were transferred to staff the pro-Russian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. A training for the commanding staff was conducted throughout the system of the 8th General Army of Russia. The complex commission of the Russian Armed Forces supervised staffing and the engineering and fortification work at the frontal positions of these personnel. A new batch of weapons and ammunition was brought into the area. Large-scale engineering work was underway.



## Exercises

In early April, control inspections of the winter training period began in the Russian Armed Forces. Relevant exercises were conducted in all military districts and Northern Fleet areas. All types and branches of the Armed Forces were inspected. In this manner, Russia was justifying the concentration of troops along the Ukrainian borders and in Crimea.

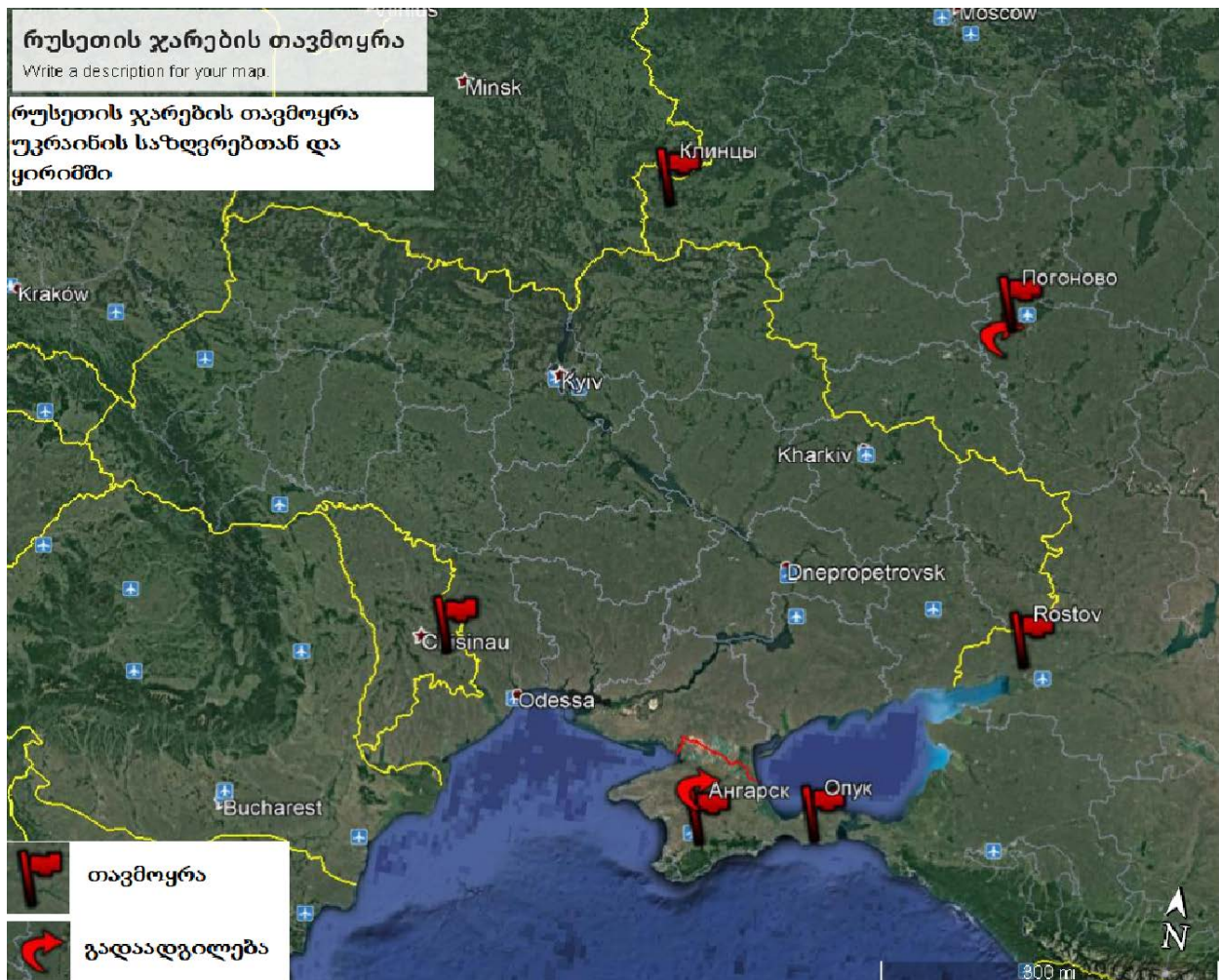


Figure 2 - Concentration of the Russian Forces at the Ukrainian Borders and in Crimea

As a part of the control inspection of the winter training period, bilateral tactical exercises were conducted simultaneously at various training grounds in the Southern Military District. Defense tasks were developed through the cooperation of the Air Force and the 4th Air Defense Army and the Black and Caspian Sea Flotillas.

Units of the 58th General Army conducted drills of tactical groups of various branches at the Opuk military range in Crimea.

As a part of the inspection, the Black Sea Fleet Marine Corps conducted exercises of loading military equipment and personnel into the tweendecks of large landing crafts. They formed columns and marched in the loading areas of the large Tsezar Kunikov, Azov and Saratov landing crafts. After loading, the ships went into the sea and formed a paratrooper detachment in the designated area.

The next stage was the conduct of artillery fire by the combat calculations of the ships on the landing coastal targets as well as the landing of troops on one of the Black Sea military training sites.

Against the backdrop of the escalation along the Ukrainian borders, the Russian Federation closed part of the Black Sea area leading to the Kerch Strait for warships and state ships of other countries from April 24 to October 31, allegedly for the purpose of conducting military exercises.

The restriction covered the following three districts: the water area along Crimea (approximately from Sevastopol to Gurzuf), the rectangular section near the Kerch Peninsula (on the traverse of the Opuksky Nature Reserve) and the small section near the western end of Crimea. The Kerch Strait and its entrances do not fall under the restriction zone.

From April 20 to 24, flight restrictions were announced over Crimea and parts of the Black Sea. The restriction zone included airspace up to 19,000 meters above the southern part of Crimea (from Sevastopol to Feodosia) over the territorial waters adjacent to the southern coast of Crimea and part of the international waters of the Black Sea.

A detachment of 20 warships went into the sea to conduct practice shootings. Black Sea Fleet aviation as well as air defense planes and helicopters were involved.

Overall, more than 10,000 military personnel and over 1,200 units of weapons and military equipment were mobilized for the Crimean exercises. Upwards of 40 warships and over 20 supply ships participated in the maneuvers. More than 2,000 paratroopers executed the landing.

### **Return of Troops to the Areas of Permanent Deployment**

The Russian Defense Minister arrived in Crimea on April 22. He announced the successful completion of the cross-branch exercises in Crimea and the return of the troops to the

permanent deployment sites by May 1. The troops were also ordered to be ready to respond immediately if the situation in NATO's Defender Europe training area would change unfavorably.

At the same time, the armament and equipment of the 41st Army remains at the Pogonovo military range. They are intended to be used in the strategic exercises Zapad-2021 scheduled for September.

By the end of April, Ukraine had detected the withdrawal of troops only from Crimea. Field camps still remained in the Voronezh region. As of May 11, the Ukrainians estimated that 75,000 Russian servicemen were still stationed at their borders while a total of about 100,000 Russian servicemen remained along the Ukrainian border and in Crimea. The withdrawal of the RF Armed Forces from the territories adjacent to the northern Ukrainian borders continued throughout the end of May but their number remained troubling. In addition, the situation in Belarus had become tense. It is not impossible to carry out aggression using Belarusian territory.

### **Ukraine's Response**

Ukraine has also responded to these Russian activities in the military and political dimensions. According to the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, 195,000 military servicemen were enlisted in its ranks in February. Of these, 40,000 were part of the united forces assigned to the Donbas theatre.<sup>1</sup>

In early April, Ukraine offered NATO to hold joint military exercises which would include patrolling Ukrainian airspace.

A set of exercises and other preparatory activities were carried out: heavy armored and artillery reserves of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stationed near Crimea conducted exercises to repel naval landing. Unmanned aerial vehicles participated in the exercise.

The Ukrainian Navy conducted joint Ukrainian-Romanian PASSEX-type exercises in the Black Sea with the participation of the Romanian Corvette Horia Macellariu.

By April 20, the Security Service of Ukraine had placed its units in all districts to an increased state of readiness. Anti-terrorist exercises have been announced in most Ukrainian regions. Multi-stage anti-terrorist exercises were conducted in the Kherson region bordering Crimea.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/gotovit-li-rossija-nastuplenie-na-ukrainu-na-chto-ukazyvajut-novye-dannye/a-57284735>



The Security Service of Ukraine, the Armed Forces, the Border Service, the National Police and the units of Special State Transport Service were engaged in the exercises. Anti-terrorist exercises were conducted near the Russian border in the Sumy region.

According to the Security Service of Ukraine, these exercises are necessary measures to increase the readiness of the country in order to counter the activities of the Russian Special Services.

### **Informational Support**

The parties conducted an information campaign in support of their goals.

The Russian side was pushing two narratives. One is that these are ordinary routine maneuvers and Russia has every right to do so. The Russian Foreign Ministry called the preparation for a renewed invasion of Ukraine the "Kyiv tale." According to them, Ukraine itself intends to invade Donbas and the situation around Ukraine will be eased only when the Ukrainian troops refrain from provocative actions.

In the second narrative, Russian propaganda talk-shows called for "an end to Ukrainian provocations." Other messages were: "Let us send tanks and raise our flag over Kyiv to get rid of this fascist state," and "It is necessary to punish the President of Ukraine for actions against pro-Russian forces." The leader of the Russian Communist Party, Zyuganov, suggested that Russia's armed forces in Donbas "be used officially and not in a hybrid-concealed manner." According to him, the recognition of the self-proclaimed republics is "the will of their compatriots."

The leaders of the self-proclaimed states were involved in the information war. According to their message box, Ukraine is ready for a full-scale war, incited by NATO and the United States of America. Other messages were: "No one needs a strong Russia and Ukraine is used to weaken it," "The Ukrainian leadership has no intention of reintegrating Donbas and Luhansk," "The aim of the population is to connect their lives with Russia," "These lands have always been and will always remain Russian," "Issuing passports is a humanitarian mission because citizens are left without documents" and "Ukraine is trying to show that Russia is a party in the conflict and not us."<sup>2</sup>

Ukrainian intelligence believes that the main efforts of the Russian propaganda are aimed at justifying the use of the Russian army against Ukraine in the eyes of the world community.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/04/16/pushilin/>

Russia is trying to present the use of troops as "preventing the emergence of a catastrophic situation in Crimea, first of all, ecological." Russia may plan to repeat the Georgian scenario. Provocations will be used to accuse the Ukrainian armed forces of attacking civilians, especially now when more than 400,000 Russian passports have already been issued in the occupied territories.

Russia's statements about the attack on Donbas by Ukraine are false and part of a disinformation campaign. This serves to discredit Ukraine in the international arena and sow panic in the temporarily occupied territories.

Ukraine was preparing for real hostilities. An interactive map of underground shelters for citizens has been updated in Kyiv.

At the end of March, the Ukrainian Rada passed a law according to which conscripts can be called up for military service during an emergency period without declaring mobilization.

They are preparing to provide weapons and military equipment. According to the director of the Ukroboronprom consortium, its state defense enterprises can produce twice as many defense products if necessary.

Overall, 59% of the state defense procurement (UAH 22.5 billion) will be spent on weapons and military equipment in 2021. Bayraktar type unmanned aerial vehicles, Neptune missile systems and BTRP-4 armored carriers will be purchased. The purchase of other missile, anti-tank and high-precision weaponry is also planned. The contract for the construction of the Ukrainian-Turkish corvette is ongoing.

Equipment is also being sought abroad, including in the USA. During a meeting with the Secretary of State, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine asked him to provide radio-electronic means for combat.

### **Assessment of the Situation**

According to the Main Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, the actions taken by the RF Armed Forces are unusual. Such gatherings of troops from different districts can be precipitated by strategic exercises. However, the closest strategic exercises - Zapad-2021- are scheduled for autumn.

"Ukraine is ready to deal with the situation in Donbas in the event of an escalation of the conflict," said Serhiy Nayev, Commander of the Operations of the Joint Ukrainian Armed Forces. The state is counting on the material and technical support of the allies, since it has

enough other resources. According to him, currently there are no visible signs of invasion of Ukraine. No assault forces are mobilized at the Ukrainian border to execute the attack. A demonstration of force is at hand.

### **International Assessment**

By early April, EUCOM had raised its observation level from a "possible crisis" to a "potentially unavoidable crisis" due to the concentration of Russian troops along Ukraine's borders.

By mid-April, the USA and NATO Joint Chiefs of Staff in Europe believed that the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine was low to moderate, although there was a declining tendency.

According to experts from the International Crisis Group (ICG), whose report was published on April 20, the likelihood of repeating the events of 2014-2015 in Donetsk was low despite the concentration of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border. In their view, Russia is content with the existing status quo. However, this convergence of troops shows that Moscow is trying to put pressure on Ukraine and force it to concede more.

According to Ben Hodges, the former Commander of the USA Troops in Europe, it could be "Russia's posturing" and testing of the new US president's administration.

It should be noted that Western assessments were not uniform. According to Philip Breedlove, the former Commander of NATO Forces in Europe, various elements of the air forces were dispersed along the Ukrainian border after mid-April which is necessary for gaining an air advantage and facilitating direct support for the ground forces. Russia has the required strategic means to invade Ukraine. "This is not a demonstration, this is a preparation for an attack," the general declared.<sup>3</sup>

The Biden administration perceived this convergence of Russian troops as a warning that it could mobilize even larger forces than would be involved in the USA and NATO exercises.<sup>4</sup>

Military analysts believe that Putin is testing Biden. He also wants to show Ukraine the limits of Western support. For Putin, the opportunity to meet with Biden is far more important than the potential benefits of military escalation. Recently, the risk of aggression was high.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/gotovit-li-rossija-nastuplenie-na-ukrainu-na-cto-ukazyvajut-novye-dannye/a-57284735>

<sup>4</sup> <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/na-granice-s-ukrainoj-ostaetsya-okolo-80-tysyach-rossijskih-vojsk-nyt>

However, the new package of sanctions and the opportunity to meet with Biden are more important.

According to Western analysts, Russia may have several goals: the Russian President wants to intimidate the Ukrainian government for creating problems for pro-Russian parties and Medvedchuk; however, it is irrational to gather such forces for this purpose. Further, Russia wants to force Ukraine to restore Crimea's water supply – however, it is again irrational to gather such forces for this purpose. Additionally, the plan may be to occupy the entire Donbas as indicated by the mobilization of troops in the north-east of Ukraine, near Voronezh, and in the south, in the vicinity of Crimea, so as to be able to attack from two directions. By doing so, Putin will also score political points in Russia while undermining the Ukrainian state. Russia may also be planning to occupy the large cities and territories in the north-eastern and eastern parts of Ukraine. It will be a big blow to the Ukrainian state but it will also be a full-scale war requiring huge resources. Another goal may have been to increase pressure on the West, something which has been achieved to some extent as, for example, the offer from Biden to hold a meeting.

Russia may never recognize it, but in the long run it aims to establish a partnership with Europe. It is, therefore, unlikely for Putin to risk a large-scale war.

The Kremlin probably will not resort to an open aggression. The consequences will be unpredictable and the damage will be huge. At the same time, Putin knows that the West will not allow this and will do everything possible to avoid such a confrontation.

### **International Support**

Ukraine's partner countries have taken some containment measures, including military ones.

State Department and Pentagon officials said that the United States was monitoring the situation. They have already supplied Ukraine with non-lethal and lethal means and will continue to do so in the future. Since 2014, the USA has provided USD 2 billion in assistance to Ukraine in this area.

The European Command of the US Armed Forces has announced an increase in the level of combat readiness and the deployment of two missile squadron boats in the Black Sea. These ships then anchored in Crete. The Pentagon declared that the US Navy would continue to conduct air reconnaissance in international airspace over the Black Sea in order to monitor any movement of the Russian Navy and troops in Crimea. In April, the US unmanned aerial vehicle RQ-4A Global Hawk was conducting reconnaissance flights over the Ukrainian-

controlled Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The flights were conducted in Severodonetsk, Slavyansk and Starobilsk as well as over the Black Sea west of Crimea, in the Mykolaiv and Berdyansk regions.

However, the US does not consider the convergence of Russian troops as a preparation for an attack; however, if anything changes, the US will be ready to respond.

By April 20, US European Command had deployed several dozen F-15 and F-16 fighter jets in Poland. According to the Pentagon spokesman, this is not related to the events in Ukraine and is a regular maneuver exercise. However, the United States is seriously concerned about Russia's growing potential along the Ukrainian borders and urges it to be more transparent, adhere to the Minsk agreement and avoid escalation of the situation along the Ukrainian borders and in Crimea.

The UK also announced the deployment of its squadron missile boat and anti-ship frigate to the Black Sea. On May 18, the British Royal Navy coastal patrol vessel OPV Trent entered the port of Odesa. Joint training with Ukrainian military sailors and the participation in PASSEX exercises are planned during the visit.

The UK will continue to assist the Ukrainian Army; in particular, in terms of military personnel training and the capacity building of the Armed Forces. This was stated by Secretary of State for Defense, Ben Wallace, in a telephone conversation with the Minister of Defense of Ukraine.

Various NATO exercises have been launched and are planned in Europe: exercises in Albania with the participation of 28,000 troops started on May 4 and will last for two months. From May 19 to June 2, the Noble Jump 2021 exercise was held in Romania with the participation of more than 4,000 military servicemen and about 600 military equipment units, including a Turkish contingent of the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – VJTF.<sup>5</sup> In June, NATO is conducting exercises in Romania and Portugal. A joint exercise between the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and the US European Command Sea Breeze is planned for the summer with the participation of other NATO partner countries. The main participants are: Ukraine, the USA, Canada, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Latvia and partner countries. Up to 4,000 military personnel will be involved in the training to include 40 warships, boats and auxiliary ships; 30 units of aviation and more than 100 vehicles and armored units.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newsru.com/world/21may2021/noblejump.html>

According to the Official Representative of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Major General Igor Konashenkov, Russia will closely monitor the conduct of these exercises. If necessary, an adequate response will be provided to ensure the safety of the Russian Federation.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Ukraine and the world are ready for Russian aggression, unlike in 2014. As soon as the convergence of Russian troops began, Ukraine also started to coordinate international support and no one believed the Russian propaganda that Ukraine was preparing an attack. According to him, Ukraine will receive a full range of military-technical assistance from its partners. There are no restrictions or prohibitions on this issue.

### **Political Assistance**

On April 2, the President of the United States spoke by telephone with the President of Ukraine and expressed strong support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine.

On April 13, the US President called Putin and urged the easing of tensions along Ukrainian borders, expressing strong support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as a determination to act firmly.

On April 14, the US President also expressed his support for Ukraine in a telephone conversation with the German Chancellor.

The US Secretary of State at various times met and spoke with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, the NATO Secretary General and the French and German Foreign Ministers to discuss matters related to Ukraine. According to him, it was necessary to explain to Russia that the price of a new military adventure would be too high.

The US Senate has approved a bill on increasing military aid to Ukraine which would provide USD 300 million in annual military aid, including lethal weaponry.

According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the first week of April was very busy in terms of Ukrainian-American relations. The Ukrainian officials met with their counterparts: the US President, the National Security Adviser to the US President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Chiefs of Staff and the Chairman of the Committee.

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<sup>6</sup> [Департамент информации и массовых коммуникаций Министерства обороны Российской Федерации](#)



Germany and France were actively involved in the negotiations to reduce tensions. On April 8, Merkel urged Putin to withdraw troops from Ukraine. The German Foreign Minister told his Ukrainian counterpart that Germany supports Ukraine in the de-escalation of the situation.

The French President said that Russia should reduce tensions along Ukraine's borders. If Russia decides to invade Ukraine, sanctions will be imposed on it. He said he was in favor of an open and genuine discussion with Russia. However, "we will never allow new military operations on Ukrainian soil and we must find ways to be convincing on this matter."

Macron and Merkel held a video conference with Putin. Among others, the issue of Russia-Ukraine was discussed. They stressed the need for Russia to commit to a ceasefire and stabilization, and seek ways to overcome the crisis in compliance with the Minsk Agreement.

The British Foreign Office has summoned the Russian ambassador and expressed deep concern "over Russia's malicious activities."

The Baltic countries were especially active. In their view, this is a matter of European security. The EU should not wait for another Russian invasion of Ukraine and should not react post factum.<sup>7</sup> It is necessary to give Ukraine a MAP and send a clear signal to Russia about the possible consequences of a new aggression.

Leading NATO countries have held online conferences and agreed that Russia is undermining the de-escalation process. They expressed their unwavering support for Ukraine.

The European Parliament has adopted a resolution on Russia, the case of Alexei Navalny, the military build-up on Ukraine's border and Russian attacks in the Czech Republic which outlines possible proposals in the case of an invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Army. These are: cutting off oil and gas imports from Russia, disconnecting it from SWIFT, freezing the assets of businessmen and their families affiliated with the government and banning them from entering the EU. The European Union and the United States have criticized Russia for closing parts of the Black Sea area

On April 12, the Foreign Ministers of the G7 countries urged Russia to stop provocations against Ukraine and ease tensions immediately in line with its international obligations.

Poland and seven other EU countries have called for new sanctions against Russia.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/seychas-es-doljen-skazat-rossii-za-vtorjenie-budut-sektoralnye-sanktsii-glava-mid-litvy>

## **Negotiations**

The Ukrainian government itself has been actively negotiating in order to secure support. In a telephone conversation, the President of Ukraine urged the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom that the UK and other NATO countries should increase their pressure on Russia through sanctions. The agreement on the Ukrainian Navy reached in October 2020 was discussed separately.

At an emergency meeting with the NATO Secretary General and the Ukraine-NATO Commission on 13 April, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister announced that new sanctions were necessary.

The President of Ukraine asked the Prime Minister of Canada to support Ukraine in the matter of granting the MAP to the country.

On April 23, Ukraine participated in the meeting of the countries on the eastern flank of NATO - Romania, Poland and Turkey. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, this is a signal.

Ukraine has urged the European Union to disconnect Russia from the SWIFT system if the situation worsens.

## **Analysis**

Ukrainian, Russian and Western experts and leaders had more or less different views on the unfolding events. However, most did not anticipate large-scale hostilities this time around.

According to Ukrainian intelligence<sup>8</sup> and military experts, the goals of Russia's actions could be to: keep Ukraine in its sphere of geopolitical influence, force Ukraine to abandon its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, resolve the issue of the occupied territories in compliance with its demands, demonstrate that the post-Soviet space is Russia's exclusive sphere of influence, put pressure on the US and the EU over their attitudes towards Ukraine and Russia by demonstrating the possibility of a real large-scale military conflict in Europe, divert the population's attention from internal problems before the upcoming parliamentary elections and negate the international outcry caused by the Navalny case and subversive activities against other countries.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/razvedka-nazvala-tri-varianta-vozmojnyh-voennyh-deystviy-rf-protiv-ukrainy>

The massive convergence of the Russian Armed Forces could be a response to the Defender Europe 2021 NATO exercises and, at the same time, a preparation for the Zapad-2021 Strategic Command-Staff exercises during which the situation may intensify again. Meanwhile, the level of military threats to Ukraine will increase.

Events could unfold in the following fashion: a demonstration of force along Ukraine's borders and in Crimea, conducting a military operation to resolve the issue of the water supply in Crimea through occupying parts of the southern regions of Ukraine and provoking the Ukrainian military to initiate military activities and then accusing Ukraine of violating the treaty.

According to the former Commander of NATO Forces in Europe, James Stavridis,<sup>9</sup> it is too early to relax even though Russia has begun withdrawing troops from areas near the Ukrainian border.

It may not be a good time for a ground operation right now but Putin may decide to tighten control over the Black Sea. The Black Sea is potentially a maritime hotspot. However, according to the recent studies by the Atlantic Council, there may be large reserves of hydrocarbons there which will further complicate the situation.

The task of the Russians will be to neutralize the Ukrainian navy, gain full control over the northern part of the Black Sea and establish control of the line connecting Russia with Crimea.

According to some experts, Russia perceives its future in hybrid wars. They are executed below the threshold of NATO intervention but allow the opportunity to acquire the status of world power. The events unfolding in Ukraine since 2014 are one of the components of this conflict.

Russia's military policy is not adequately supported by its economic strength but is driven by domestic political necessity. Russia is trying to gain an advantage by taking preemptive actions and it succeeds in doing so. It is waging small-scale, fundamentally new types of wars shielding itself with its nuclear potential. Its purpose is to impress, intimidate and tame the West and its neighbors.

Russia's problem is that it is uncompetitive in all areas except for raw materials and armaments while a war, including a hybrid one, requires large financial resources. However, there is also no other solution. Reduced foreign activity may disrupt the domestic social order.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://inosmi.ru/military/20210508/249681180.html>

The West must bear in mind that hybrid warfare is not a mere continuation of the old but is a dynamic form of politics that is dangerous to all parties, especially in the face of China's rise as a world power.<sup>10</sup>

Russian and pro-Russian experts are of the opinion that Russia does not want a war with Ukraine and such a war is not to be expected either. But if Ukraine, encouraged by the West, decides to return Donbas by force, Russia will have no other choice but to use force. In this case, Ukraine may even lose its statehood.

In its view, the US is interested in war and can encourage Ukraine to do so. Moreover, Kyiv is inspired by the Karabakh example and will try to repeat the Azerbaijani success through Turkish Bayraktars.

The US is losing nothing. It invests almost nothing in Ukraine and gives it only a small number of second-hand armaments and equipment. As for finances, it is done in the form of loans which aggravates Ukraine's already difficult situation.

According to Russian and pro-Russian experts, if the hostilities resume, it will be possible to deploy naval paratroopers in the areas of Odesa and Mariupol. The population here is more or less loyal to the Russians. Ukraine will not be able to resist because its already weak naval forces (base - Odesa) and air force (bases - Mykolaiv, Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Ivano-Frankivsk) will be shattered by preliminary missile strikes or blocked. The Neptun anti-ship missile complex, the only battery in the Odesa-Mykolaiv region, will be also destroyed.

The Russian Armed Forces may carry out strikes:

- Towards the Kyiv and Kharkiv-Dnipropetrovsk area (20th General Army, 1st Tank corps);
- From the south in the direction of Crimea-Zaporizhzhia (22nd Army Corps, 58th Army);
- By deploying naval paratroopers in the direction of Odesa and Mariupol (76th and 7th Airborne Divisions). Attacks from the Odesa direction could pose a threat for the forces stationed in the operational area of the defense on the right bank of the Dnipro in terms of possible attacks from the rear.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/plus231341961/Moskauer-Machtraeume-Russland-will-Kriege-fuehren-die-es-gar-nicht-bezahlen-kann.html>

- From the Donbas side, where Ukraine's most combat capable units are located, the Ukrainian Armed Forces will be surrounded by the 8th General Army and the 1st and 2nd Army Corps of the Unrecognized.

Ukraine will have to disperse its forces in many directions, although a tipping point will inevitably occur in just a few days. After that, everything will depend on Russia's desire of how deeply it wants to invade Ukraine.

Russia can repeat the "Georgian scenario," destroy the Ukrainian Armed Forces, reach the administrative borders of the rebel territories, recognize their independence and station its armed forces there.

Direct intervention of NATO is out of the question. The promised support is only demagoguery.

It should be noted that Russia will face more serious economic problems. Supporting the Donetsk and Luhansk regions is already a big burden for it. Expansion of the controlled areas will make this burden heavier. In addition, the restraining factor will be the rise of anti-Russian sentiments in the occupied territories and beyond.

Therefore, the "Georgian version" is more acceptable to Russia. Russia is not interested in the war but it cannot escape it for domestic political reasons if Kyiv will be the initiator.

Most of these problems would not have been urgent if Russia had built upon a military success in 2014 and annexed the entire Donbas or the whole strip from Odesa to Kharkiv.

According to experts, Ukraine, within its current borders, will never be friendly to Russia. Moscow's goal should be to dismantle this state, preferably by non-military means.

None of the options can be ruled out, especially when losing the war is not necessarily a problem for the Ukrainian leadership, except for the personal damage to them and their property.

What can be said about such military scenarios?

Geographically, eastern Ukraine is a less slashed area with a terrain that is not conducive to organizing defense using large natural barriers, even more so when the enemy has a significant advantage, especially in the means of fire power. Certain districts and settlements may be selected as defensive fortifications but the gaps between them will be much larger than the overall front of these fortifications themselves. Under such conditions, defense can be organized in separate directions by combining mobile and positional defense where mobile defense units eventually assemble in positional defense areas, presumably in large cities. The

adversary will try to sidestep these areas and continue to advance towards the final goal as attacking positional defense areas will lead to a loss of pace, the weakening of forces and heavy casualties among civilians.

In this case, these areas will find themselves cut off from the rear, greatly complicating their logistical support. However, in the case of prior preparation, sufficient supplies can be stored there.

In the case of large-scale actions, the casualties on both sides will be very large. However, the Russian side currently enjoys a significant advantage in missile forces and artillery and in the event of war, the West will try to support Ukraine in this component and reduce this gap which will lead to large losses on the offensive side.

As for the air component, the Russian Air Force is by no means an omnipotent and invincible force. Ukraine itself has sufficient air defense forces and means. If they are reinforced with Western support, everything could end in great losses for Russia.

As for the deployment of paratroopers, it is quite a difficult task even during the exercises and active resistance and can lead to big losses. Moreover, if the paratroopers deployed in the area of Mariupol can be supported by the units stationed in Crimea (although it should be noted that the defensive positions on the administrative border are already prepared and occupied), Donbas and Russia, such support in the area of Odesa will be more problematic. The Russian contingent stationed in Moldova can be used here; however, it goes beyond the military sphere and is a certain political issue.

Historical parallels can be drawn between the USSR's Afghan campaign and Russia's hypothetical Ukrainian campaign: comparing the capabilities of the USSR with today's Russia, the military capabilities of present-day Ukraine and the Afghan Mujahideen, the expected Western support for Ukraine and the previous support for the Afghan Mujahideen. A method of deduction can point to the possible results of the Ukrainian campaign.

Probably in the worst-case scenario for Ukraine, in the first phase of hostilities, the Russian Armed Forces may cross the Dnipro River and acquire several positional defense zones in the rear but even this can occur only at the expense of very large losses. After this, prolonged and positional military operations will be practically unavoidable, also with large losses. How acceptable would this be for Russia and the West itself which would then have to face a very large-scale and protracted military confrontation in the middle of Europe?



## Conclusions

How the events could unfold?

Large-scale military actions are not in the interests of either Ukraine and Russia or the West.

Russia lacks the resources to provide political and economic support for this campaign and its aftermath. However, due to domestic pressures, it requires some results, at least - a solution to the Crimean water supply problem. Russia may also resort to the "Georgian" version.

The West will have to make more tangible decisions; otherwise, it will receive a large-scale military conflict in the middle of Europe and with long-term consequences.

Ukraine will have to concentrate its efforts on strengthening and optimizing its capabilities, including in terms of population consolidation. Otherwise, it will constantly face national security challenges and risks.

Escalation is still possible during the large-scale training period scheduled for the summer and the fall.